



U.S. Senator

Jim Jeffords



Summer, 2000

## United States Senate Report to Seniors

*Dear Fellow Vermonter:*

*It has been an exciting and busy year in the nation's Capital. In my role as the Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and a member of the Senate Finance Committee, I have been working on issues that have a real impact on all Vermonters. I am proud to have served Vermont in the United States Congress for close to twenty-six years, and am very pleased to be in a position to make a difference.*

*In recent months I have traveled from Middlebury to St. Johnsbury, Enosburg to Brattleboro, listening to your concerns on important issues. Issues such as making prescription drugs more affordable, improving the quality of our health care, and strengthening crucial programs like the Older Americans Act, Social Security and Medicare are top among them. As we tackle these problems, I strongly believe that we must work together in a bi-partisan fashion. I am proud to serve Vermonters in a tradition of independence and individualism that makes our State so unique.*

*As you know, I value deeply the opinions of Vermonters, whether they are offered in person, by phone, in letters or by e-mail. And, as usual I'll be spending as much time as I can in Vermont. In the meantime, I hope you find this newsletter informative.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jim*  
Jim Jeffords

## Making Prescription Drugs More Affordable and Accessible

Prescription medicines have revolutionized the treatment of certain diseases, but they are only effective if patients have access to the medicines that their doctors prescribe. The best medicines in the world will not help a person who can not afford them. And they can actually do more harm than good if taken with the improper dosage.

On May 9, Senator Jeffords introduced S. 2520, the Medicine Equity and Drug Safety (MEDS) Act, which will allow pharmacists and wholesalers to get the same FDA-approved drugs sold at lower prices in other countries, and pass the savings on to consumers in the U.S. This bipartisan proposal builds on legislation he introduced last year that would allow imports from Canada for personal use, and borrows from another bill cosponsored by Congressman Sanders in the House that would allow reimportation of prescription drugs that were made in U.S. facilities.

The most important aspect of this bill is safety. The MEDS Act preserves the FDA's gold standard for safety by letting the experts at Health and Human Services (HHS) determine the best mechanism for allowing such imports.

The MEDS Act is not the only solution to the problem of high prescription drug costs. The Senator strongly

believes we need to enact a broad prescription drug benefit, and he is currently working through the Finance Committee to ensure that prescription drugs are a part of whatever Medicare reform legislation is enacted this year. But the MEDS Act is a positive, bipartisan measure that can be implemented *now* to bring prescription drug prices down for all Americans.

Senator Jeffords has sponsored other bills that will help Vermont seniors get their prescriptions *right now*, even if a comprehensive Medicare reform proves to be elusive this year. The first is the DrugGap Insurance for Seniors Act (S. 1725), which will provide insurance coverage for prescription medicines free of charge for low-income Vermonters who do not get drugs through Medicaid or employer-sponsored coverage. The second is the Pharmaceutical Aid for Seniors Act (S. 1942), to give federal support to State Pharmaceutical Assistance Programs, like Vermont's V-Script program. These programs help low income seniors afford prescription drugs. This bill would also direct federal funds to state-run medications management programs so that Vermont seniors can get the pharmacist counseling that they need to avoid foreseeable adverse drug interactions that come from treating multiple diseases with multiple medications.

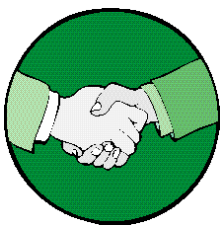


# Jeffords Landmark Disability Bill Enacted

The Work Incentives Improvement Act, first introduced by Senator Jeffords in 1996, has been hailed as the biggest step forward for the disability community since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. More than 9.5 million disabled Americans, including over 24,000 Vermonters, automatically lose federal health benefits if they earn more than \$500 in one month. Under Senator Jeffords' legislation, severely disabled individuals will be able to remain in or return to the workforce without losing the federal health benefits necessary for their daily living. In addition, they will have access to more job training and placement assistance than is currently available. President Clinton signed this bill into law on December 17, 1999.

*For more information on disability issues in Vermont contact: the Vermont Association of Business Industry & Rehabilitation (VABIR) at 800-639-2909 or on the web at <http://www.VABIR.com>; or the State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation at 800-361-1239 or on the web at <http://www.dad.state.vt.us>.*

## Jeffords' Medicare Wellness Act Picks Up Bicameral, Bipartisan Support



Last year Senator Jeffords led a bipartisan Senate coalition in introducing legislation – ***The Medicare Wellness Act*** – to increase the number of preventative benefits available to Medicare beneficiaries and establish a process for keeping those benefits up-to-date over the long haul.

The legislation has the support of the American Heart Association, Partnership for Prevention, and the National Osteoporosis Foundation.

Americans are now more active and are playing a greater role in their own health care; prevention is a part of this trend. Making wellness a functional part of Medicare coverage, also recognizes that it is more cost effective to prevent illness than to treat it.

## Veterans Health Care in Vermont

Senator Jeffords believes that all Veterans are entitled to the best possible health care. In 1999 he worked with the Vermont delegation to help secure \$7 million for a rural health care project at the Veterans Medical Center in White River Junction. In addition, the Senate Finance Committee approved legislation introduced by Senator Jeffords that will allow more veterans access to the Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facility of their choice. The legislation, known as Medicare Subvention, would give Medicare-eligible veterans the ability to use their Medicare entitlement when seeking care at a local VA medical facility. Veterans not currently receiving their care at the VA would be allowed to get their Medicare-covered care at the VA. The bill establishes a three-year demonstration project at up to 8 sites around the nation. It includes a requirement that 2 sites be designated in a region that serves a rural population. Senator Jeffords hopes that the White River Junction Veterans Hospital will be chosen as one of these demonstration sites.

*For more information on federal Veterans issues you can contact the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs at 1-800-827-1000 or on the web at <http://www.va.gov>.*

## New Tax Code Law Helps Working Seniors

For many years, Senator Jeffords has been opposed to the Social Security earnings limit on seniors who work. Earlier this year he voted to repeal the earnings limit for more than 800,000 seniors in the workforce who annually lose some or all of their Social Security benefits because the government penalizes seniors for working past retirement age.

Repealing the earnings limit will help improve the retirement security of seniors by allowing them to earn more and save longer. Working seniors shouldn't get a smaller Social Security check just because they earn a paycheck.

Until this year, Social Security recipients aged 65-69 who earned more than \$17,000 lost \$1 in Social Security benefits for every \$3 of wages they earned above that earnings limit. Senator Jeffords supported legislation to eliminate this earnings limit. President Clinton has signed the legislation into law.

If you fall in this category, you may have retroactive benefits to January 1, 2000.

*You can contact the Social Security Administration at 1-800-772-1213 or on the web at <http://www.ssa.gov/>.*

## Jeffords Legislation to Strengthen Medicare Passes

As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, Senator Jeffords helped develop legislation that added \$11 billion to Medicare and restored an estimated \$34 million to Vermont's health care providers over the next five years. The bill contained a number of important changes to Medicare that will more fairly compensate Vermont's home health agencies, doctors, nursing homes, and rural hospitals. Among these provisions is one that will put Vermont's sole teaching hospital, Fletcher Allen, on a par with other New England teaching hospitals. The bill will increase Medicare reimbursement to Fletcher Allen, which provides half of all hospital services in the state, by almost \$5 million in fiscal year 2000 alone.

## Jeffords Working to Pass Patients' Bill of Rights

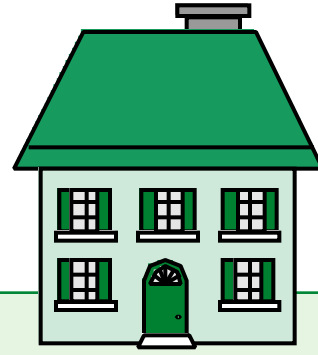
Last year, the Senate passed "The Patients' Bill of Rights." This legislation represents the most significant Congressional effort since 1974 to establish new managed care patient protections. It was based on legislation which Senator Jeffords introduced and which was approved by the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

This fall, the House passed its companion bill and a Senate/House conference committee has been appointed. As the Chairman of the Committee which has the primary jurisdiction over these issues, the Senator has been appointed as one of the 12 Senate conferees.

"The Patients' Bill of Rights" will provide managed care protections for the 98,000 Vermonters who are not covered by State protections and the right to an independent external appeal for everyone who has employer-provided health insurance. It would also ban the use of predictive genetic information for insurance underwriting purposes and it allows for the full deduction of health insurance for the self-employed.

Both bills also include a prudent layperson standard for emergency care, a mandatory point-of-service option, direct access to OB/GYNs and pediatricians, a guarantee of continuity of care, a prohibition on gag rules, access to medication, access to specialists, access to approved clinical trials, and provider non-discrimination provisions.

In spite of the political hurdles, Senator Jeffords believes that Congress can produce solid legislation that will result in a greatly improved health care system for Vermonters and all Americans. The opportunity exists to expand patient protections without significantly increasing premiums and adding to the number of uninsured. Jeffords remains hopeful that the conference committee will be able to move forward and produce compromise legislation that can be passed by Congress and signed into law by the President.



## Home Heating Oil Prices

Senator Jeffords recently helped make a home heating oil delivery in South Burlington to highlight his concern that fuel prices will again spike this winter. He has taken several steps to address the home heating oil crisis including:

- Calling for the creation a Northeast Home Heating Oil Reserve;
- Educating consumers on benefits of pre-purchasing their winter's fuel needs;
- Pushing domestic and OPEC refiners to increase production of fuel oils;
- Requesting the Federal Trade Commission to investigate increases in fuel prices;
- Calling on the President to release oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.



## Preserving Home Health Care

Senator Jeffords has led the fight to prevent cuts to home health care services. Jeffords helped develop a provision in last year's Omnibus Consolidated Budget Act that prevented a scheduled 15% reduction in home health payments from going into effect, saving Vermont home health agencies \$5.4 million this year. This is the second year in a row that he has successfully blocked home health cuts. Seniors depend on the home health benefit offered by the Medicare program, and Jeffords will work to make sure it will be there for them.

Home health care means that people recovering from surgery can go home sooner – it means that someone recovering from an accident can get physical therapy in his or her home, it means our seniors can stay at home, and out of nursing homes. But there are some seniors who are being denied access to this smart policy because they are not considered "homebound" for attending religious services, visiting family members in the hospital, and attending adult day care, all of which are important and part of a successful recovery process. Seniors deserve a more consistent standard to depend upon, rather than a completely arbitrary number of absences from the home.

Sadly, stories like this are becoming more common. The Senator has introduced legislation to ensure that home health coverage decisions would be based on the condition of the individual and not on an arbitrary number of absences from the home. Eligibility for home care services should be based on the difficulty of leaving the home rather than the reasons a patient leaves the home.



# Jeffords Spearheads Effort to Renew Older Americans Act

Senator Jeffords is deeply committed to strengthening vital programs for the elderly, including reauthorizing the Older Americans Act (OAA) during this session of Congress. The OAA provides grants to Vermont and its five local Area Agencies on Aging; funds that are essential for providing elder care services to Vermont seniors. The OAA also funds grants for research, training and demonstrations of innovative programs of elderly services, as well as senior meal sites, home-delivered meals, and senior centers. Finally, the OAA provides employment services so that elders can have jobs and continue to make important contributions to our community service programs.

Senator Jeffords is working hard to see that OAA continues to deliver of a wide range of social and nutritional services for older persons and employment programs, and that it is strengthened to include the National Family Caregiver Support Program. At his urging, the Senate Appropriations Committee boosted funding for home-delivered meals by \$35 million.

The Senator has met personally with Mr. Horace Deets, Executive Director of the AARP, to enlist the support and assistance of the national aging network in reauthorizing the OAA. He hopes the reauthorization will incorporate some of the innovative programs that are being developed in Vermont that encourage the growth of congregate meal programs, and develop a strong bill that will best serve the needs of the recipients, our nation's elderly.

## Campaign Finance Reform



Senator Jeffords is seen here with other sponsors of legislation to increase the disclosure rules for so-called 527 tax-exempt groups. These groups exploit a recently discovered loophole in the tax code that allows organizations seeking to influence federal elections to fund election work with undisclosed and unlimited contributions at the same time they claim exemption from both federal taxation and the federal election laws. Jeffords was a cosponsor of the legislation, which President Clinton recently signed into law.

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